

## **LABOR SYSTEMS IN THE COLONIES**

### **HEADRIGHT SYSTEM**

In 1618, **the Headright System** was introduced as a means to solve the labor shortage. It provided the following:

- Colonists already residing in Virginia were granted two headrights, meaning two tracts of 50 acres each, or a total of 100 acres of land.
- New settlers who paid their own passage to Virginia were granted one headright. Since every person who entered the colony received a headright, families were encouraged to migrate together.

Virginia planters obtaining land grants from the king (Charles I) were called **Cavaliers**. Virginia planters who imported their labor were awarded 50 acres(HEADRIGHTS) per slave, just as they were awarded 50 acres per indentured servant. Both large and small landowners imported slaves, or purchased them from ship captains who brought them to the colony for sale. George Menefie was the first to claim a large number of headrights for one shipment of slaves, obtaining 1,150 acres for the 23 slaves he imported along with 37 other (white) servants in 1638. The headright claims for the indentured servants listed the names of the individuals, but the claims for slaves rarely identified individual slaves.

In 1699, after European immigrants became harder and harder to attract, the colony began to sell "treasury rights" allowing people to claim 50 acres for 5 shillings. Landowners who surveyed tracts and actually acquired patents (certifying their exclusive ownership of a particular parcel) might sell 100 acres for as much as three pounds. Since there were 10 shillings in a pound, that was a 600% markup.

### **INDENTURED SERVANTS**

Indentured servants were immigrant workers who contracted orally or in writing to work for a limited period — usually 4-7 years — after which they were entitled to "freedom dues". Otherwise, they received no pay except housing and upkeep. Most came from England, Ireland, Germany, and Scotland. In colonial America they constituted a significant part of the labor force. Between the 1650s and 1770s, some 300,000 to 400,000 servants arrived. During 1630-1680, a half-century when tobacco-growing became the main occupation in the Chesapeake area, about 75,000 English immigrants arrived of whom up to 56,000 were indentured servants.<sup>33</sup> In New England, about one-third of the labor force in the early years of settlement were indentured servants.<sup>34</sup> Over the whole of the 17th century, however, servants made up only five percent of the New England colonies. In Philadelphia, the demand for servants was great. By the 1740s, "indentured servants constituted more than 1/5 of Philadelphia's total white male work force and an even larger

percentage of the people who worked with their hands.” During the same years, “along the wharves and in the artisans’ shops more than two of every five laboring roles were filled by unfree toilers” including servants and enslaved workers. On the eve of the Revolution, while indentured servitude was declining nearly everywhere else, in Philadelphia servants still represented over ten percent of the city’s labor supply.

Indentured servants were semi-slaves. They could be bought or sold during their period of contracted service. In fact, “servants were generally conveyed by a bill of sale, similar to that used in the conveyance of livestock.” Their owners were obligated to pay taxes upon them, as on any other property. While a servant could be attached to cover a debt owed by a decedent master, in Pennsylvania this was prohibited while the master was alive. Servants were not allowed to marry during the period of service. They could not serve on juries nor vote. “Most rights regarded as basic to the English heritage were held in abeyance until their terms of service were up.” Servants could be, and were, beaten, whipped, or otherwise “corrected”. When fugitive servants were apprehended, their term of service was lengthened by one to five days for each day absent. Owners advertised personal descriptions of runaways to aid in recapture. Runaways to other colonies were frequently recovered via extradition agreements among the colonies. In Virginia, Governor Wyatt ruled that “incorrigible servants were to be burnt in the tongue with a red-hot iron.” Historians disagree as to the personal relations between servants and masters. One writes that “discontent was rife between master and servant from the very beginning of New England settlement” and another that “the relationship between servant and master was usually close.”

Freedom dues were a frequent subject of litigation initiated by servants. Masters, eager to avoid such payments, frequently encouraged servants to leave before the contracted date so that freedom dues would not need to be paid. Frequently, the dues were not paid at all and this occasioned many lawsuits. During the 1640s, 1650s, and 1660s, Virginia’s governors regularly refused to comply with the contracted term of indenture for their own servants until directed by court suits filed by the servants. Of course, the longer-off the end date, the later would payment of freedom dues have to be made. In Chester County (Pa.) Quarter Sessions Court between 1745 and 1751, “nearly half of the servant complaints against masters ... involved freedom dues.”

Servants who hoped to acquire land through indentured work were disappointed. As Richard Morris explains:

In at least 90 percent of the cases which arose in the colonial courts involving freedom dues, clothes and tools were awarded, but a grant

of land was neither regarded as an obligation under the contract nor required by custom. ... The weight of the evidence proves conclusively that freedom dues did not as a general rule include land.

The former servants may have been cash poor, but they could usually buy land on credit from one of the many members of the gentry.